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BATTLEFORD NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

Battleford, Saskatchewan

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View of Stockade showing Main Gate and Bastion.
Fort Battleford National Historic Park.

A wise nation preserves its records . . . gathers
up its muniments . . . decorates the tombs of
its illustrious dead . . . repairs its great public
structures and fosters national pride and love
of country by perpetual reference to the
sacrifices and glories of the past.

. . . *Joseph Howe*



Issued Under the Authority of the

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Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development



Group of Buildings showing left to right — Commanding Officer's Residence (1877); Officer's Quarters (1886); Sick Horse Stable (1898); Guard Room (1886). Fort Battleford National Historic Park.

FORT BATTLEFORD NATIONAL HISTORIC PARK

Battleford, Saskatchewan

Fort Battleford National Historic Park is situated in the townsite of Battleford on a triangular area dividing the Battle and North Saskatchewan Rivers, about two miles west of their junction. Located in the territory of the Cree Indian, it was chosen in 1875 to be the district headquarters for the North West Mounted Police. The fort was destined to play a memorable role in the development of the North West.

In 1870, when the young Dominion of Canada purchased the million square miles of territory known as Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company, it fell heir to three problems. The first, and oldest, was the tribal warfare which had been waged intermittently for centuries between nomadic Plains Indians. The second, a product of earlier expansion in the United States, was the illicit whisky traffic maintained by American traders to the utter demoralization and debauchery of the natives. The third, and most important, was the inevitable friction as the new civilization introduced by a tide of white immigration began to encroach on the ancient and uncomplicated "mode de vie" of the Indians and their half-brothers, the Metis.

North West Mounted Police

The North West Mounted Police Force was created by the Canadian Government in 1873 on the advice of veteran traders, explorers, and special investigators in an effort to provide a solution to all three problems. The Force, 300 strong, was organized and trained immediately and, in July 1874, moved off to undertake the seemingly impossible task of bringing law and order to something less than half-a-million square miles of plain and forest. This area was inhabited by more than 25,000 Indians, until then subjected to the contradictory influences of a few score avaricious traders and a dozen or more courageous and earnest missionaries. Testimony to the success of the venture is the peacefully unfolding history of prairie settlement.

The Original Fort

Fort Battleford, fifth of the great bastions of law and order to be built by the Mounted Police, was established in the summer of 1876 by Sub-Inspector James Walker. The original fort, a square of roughly-constructed cottonwood log buildings was built by members of the Force, except for the quarters of the Commanding Officer. This building, still standing, was erected in 1877-78 by the Department of Public Works, then engaged in providing quarters and offices for officials of the North West Territorial Government, recently moved to Battleford from Fort Pelly. It was a two-storey house constructed of squared timbers put up "Red River Style", the joints being filled up with lime and sand. The insides of the walls were strapped, lathed, and plastered, the outside later strapped and mudded. The roof was covered with hand-sawn shingles, and the eaves finished with bracketed corners. Accommodation within included a dining-room, parlour, three bedrooms, kitchen, summer kitchen, and a double cellar walled with masonry.

The Indians

Presence of the Police and the North West Council stimulated a steady influx of settlers, but for at least a decade the Indians remained the chief concern of the North West Mounted Police. Inspector Walker had been designated Indian Agent for Treaty No. 6, concluded in 1876 with the Indians of Fort Carlton and Fort Pitt. The Saskatchewan District under his command extended from Fort Saskatchewan on the west to Duck Lake on the east, and included all that territory north of the South Saskatchewan lying between those points. Within those limits dwelt some of the most powerful Indians on the Plains, including the influential Poundmaker, and the enigmatic and crafty Big Bear. The latter had refused treaty in 1876 and continued to roam the plains until 1883, restlessly seeking the vanishing buffalo, and instilling terror into the hearts of lonely settlers by incessant and threatening demands for food.

By 1879 Walker was convinced trouble was brewing and sought permission to fortify his post with a palisade. Refused by Ottawa, he nevertheless proceeded to carry out his recommendation, ironically setting at the task the very Indians against whom protection was thought necessary. A stockade 10 feet high was completed the next year by his successor, Superintendent W. M. Herchmer, but a request for permission to aid bastions was ignored.

The Uprising

Ultimate collapse of friendly relations with implacable elements of Indians and Metis came early in 1885. Assistant Commissioner L. N. F. Crozier, the Force's outstanding officer then commandant of Fort Battleford, led 50 reinforcements to Fort Carlton on March 15 to be within striking distance of the Metis strongholds of Duck Lake and Batoche. At Duck Lake, on March 26, while attempting to suppress the first armed resistance to officers of the Force in course of their duty, Crozier's force of 99 Mounted Police and Volunteers was soundly defeated by a large party of Metis and Indians commanded by the old buffalo hunter, Gabriel Dumont.

At Fort Battleford, Inspector W. S. Morris had been left with 40 men to protect a district populated by more than 400 settlers. Already terrified by rumours of a general Indian war, they came crowding into the refuge of the Police Fort. On March 30, restless bands of Crees and Stoneys from the surrounding reserves began to pillage the old town south of the Battle River. Meanwhile word drifted in of the murder of their farm instructor and a farmer near the Reserve by the Stoneys on the same day, and on April 2, 100 miles up the Saskatchewan River, nine white residents of the Frog Lake Reserve were killed by Big Bear's band.

Fort Strengthened

Morris dispatched a rider on a 200-mile dash to Swift Current for reinforcements, then set the refugees to strengthening the Fort. An earthen embankment supported by a breastwork of logs was thrown up on the inside and loopholes pierced at intervals through the stockade wall. Entrenched bastions were thrust out at the northwest and southeast corners to accommodate the single 7-pound M.L.R. which comprised the Fort's sole artillery. Two volunteer home-guard companies were formed from the citizenry to reinforce the Mounted Police.

On April 22 Inspector Francis Dickens, with 21 men from Fort Pitt, brought news of abandonment of the Fort before overwhelming odds, and a seven-day ordeal shooting 100 miles of turbid Saskatchewan River in a leaky scow buffeted by growling spring ice.

Two days later the second column of the North West Field Force, led by Colonel W. D. Otter, brought relief to Battleford. Never directly attacked, only half besieged, the Fort had nevertheless occupied a precarious position, lying as it did within striking distance of several thousand armed Indians in a state of greater or lesser revolt.

Colonel Otter, with part of his column reinforced by Mounted Police and volunteers from the garrison, then struck unsuccessfully on May 2 at the Cree encampment 35 miles west of Battleford. Here, on his Cut Knife Hill Reserve, Poundmaker had been nervously sitting it out, opposed to more violence and barely containing the passions of the immoderates responsible for the killings and pillaging at Battleford. Suddenly apprised of the advancing soldiery he allowed the old warrior Fine Day to organize the defence which sent Otter's forces retreating after seven hours with eight dead and fourteen wounded.

Far from chastening and immobilizing Poundmaker the indefensible attack on his people induced the chieftain reluctantly to take the trail to the assistance of Riel at Batoche. The camp moved slowly, capturing a supply train in the Eagle Hills on May 14. Just south of Battleford the news of Riel's defeat at Batoche arrived and Poundmaker immediately sent runners to General Middleton asking surrender terms. On the 26th, just below Fort Battleford, he delivered himself and his arms, together with the murderers of Payne and Fremont, into the hands of the General.

Law and Order Restored

Collapse of the uprising brought a close to the frontier phase of Mounted Police activity. Tremendous immigration followed, and the nature of the Police task altered accordingly.

Fort Battleford, by 1885, was in a dilapidated condition, no longer suited to the needs of the Force required in the district. From a modest beginning of 13 officers and men its strength had grown by the end of the uprising to 199.

New Post Established

In 1886 Superintendent Steele (later Major General Sir S. B. Steele, K.C.M.G.) recommended expansion of the post, and that summer the Department of Public Works erected an entirely new post, including quarters for non-commissioned officers and men, mess-hall and kitchen, hospital, guard-room, and stables. Earlier a two-storey officers' quarters had been started by the Police and was completed with the remainder.

Superintendent John Cotton, who planned the expansion, had left the need of making Fort Battleford a permanent headquarters and recommended eventual replacement of the frame buildings with brick. The building was regarded therefore as a temporary measure, the barracks in fact being so constructed as to be convertible to stables when so required. The proposed permanent quarters never materialized, however, and the Force was gradually withdrawn, and the post abandoned in 1924.

In the course of time all the original log buildings disappeared, being pulled down to remove eyesores. The last, a stable, was accidentally razed by fire in 1903.

National Historic Park

After the post was abandoned the buildings gradually became prey to souvenir hunters and vandals until outraged citizens put an end to the despoiling by establishing, with provincial assistance, a Memorial to the North West Mounted Police which included five of the buildings. On July 1, 1951, almost 75 years to the day from its establishment, Fort Battleford became a National Historic Park.


Existing Buildings

The Sick Horse Stable: Constructed 1898. This building reflects the important role of the faithful charger in policing the plains.

The Guard-Room: Constructed 1886. Story of the uprising, 1885.

The Mess-Hall and Kitchen: Constructed 1886. As the strength of the post diminished this building eventually served as living quarters for the men and non-commissioned officers, kitchen and cook's quarters, and mess-hall.

DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT
NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES SERVICE



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